

2004-05 WATERFOWL SEASONS

Broad frameworks of waterfowl hunting dates, season lengths, and bag limits are developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in cooperation with states from each of the 4 flyways – Atlantic, Mississippi (including Missouri), Central, and Pacific. A series of technical meetings, administrative review, and public comment are documented in the Federal Register and provide the forum for biological and social considerations. The result of this regulations process is a general waterfowl season framework within which states select specific season dates. States can recommend a season more restrictive but no more liberal than the federal framework. All states within each flyway share a common framework of season length and bag limits; Missouri's basic season structure is the same as the 14 Mississippi Flyway states from Minnesota in the North to Louisiana in the South.

Adaptive Harvest Management:

Duck seasons, based on regulatory alternatives developed under the Adaptive Harvest Management Program (AHM) provide for a 60-day season with a 6-duck daily bag limit in 2004-05 for the 8th consecutive year. AHM is a process implemented in 1995, that provides a framework for making harvest regulation decisions with incomplete knowledge of mallard population dynamics (response to harvest, and to habitat) and about certain environmental variables (wetland conditions). Development of regulations under AHM requires agreeing on a harvest management objective and a limited number of regulations options (currently 3 packages), and formulating specific models of relationships between harvest and populations.

The AHM protocol has been based solely upon the status of mid-continent mallards. Protection of other species that are below objective levels is provided through other provisions, such as limiting the number of days within the overall season framework (such as pintails and canvasbacks). A current challenge for AHM is to incorporate other species into the AHM decision-making process.

Each year, the status of populations and habitat conditions are primary considerations when duck seasons are recommended. For 2004, even though wetland conditions are below the long-term, average numbers of breeding mallards still resulted in the recommendation of a liberal 60-day season for 2004-05. For more specific information about Adaptive Harvest Management refer to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service web page at:

<http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/mgmt/ahm/ahm-intro.htm>

Table 9. Duck season options in the Mississippi Flyway .

Regulation	Restrictive	Moderate	Liberal
Season Length	30 days	45 days	60 days
Duck Bag Limit	3 ducks	6 ducks	6 ducks
Mallard Bag Limit	2 (1)	4 (1)	4 (2)

* A closed season is an option each year.

Canvasbacks and Pintails:

The objective for canvasbacks to maintain a breeding population of at least 500,000 would not likely be achieved if canvasback hunting was allowed for a full 60-day season. Likewise, pintail

numbers have improved from a record low of 1.8 million during 2002 to 2.2 million in 2004, but recent gains would likely be lost if a one-bird bag for pintails was allowed for the full season. Therefore, the allowable season length for pintails and canvasbacks will be only 30 days. We recommend that these days be concurrent with the first 30 days of the duck season, when most hunters participate (including novice hunters), to minimize the number of “mistakes” that could occur.

Goose Frameworks:

A Canada goose season of up to 77 days in 3 segments is designed to provide; 1) greater hunting opportunity for giant Canada geese produced in Missouri (September and early October); 2) opportunity for concurrent duck and goose hunting; and 3) late season opportunity for migrant Canadas from the Eastern Prairie Population (no more than 30 days after 30 November are allowed in the North and Middle zones), and giant Canada geese from other states. A daily bag limit of 1 during late season is designed to reduce the harvest of Eastern Prairie Population Canada geese in Missouri by 25%, and is in line with proposed reductions in other EPP states.

Conservation Order:

A light goose Conservation Order will be in effect for the 7th consecutive year during spring 2005. The Conservation Order was implemented to reduce numbers of snow and Ross's geese that have rapidly increased in number and are causing damage to portions of the fragile arctic tundra. The Conservation Order will be in effect through April 30, 2005. Lesser snow (white and blue color phase) and Ross's geese may be taken with the use of electronic calls, unplugged shotguns, and shooting until ½ hour after sunset. A valid Missouri Migratory Bird Hunting Permit (\$6) is the only permit required for residents and nonresidents to participate in the Conservation Order. There is no daily bag or possession limit during the Conservation Order.

Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented a youth waterfowl hunting day (in addition to regular hunting season days) for youth under 16 years of age in 1996-99. A 2-day rather than a single-day season was provided beginning in fall 2000 and again will be offered this fall. The youth hunting days incorporate a weekend or holidays up to 14 days before or after the regular season. The bag limit is the same as during the regular season.

Youth must be accompanied by an adult who is not allowed to hunt ducks but who can participate in other open seasons (e.g., geese). No permits are required for the youth hunters. Nonhunting adults, however, must be licensed unless the youth hunter possesses a valid hunter education certificate card. Only ducks were allowed during 1996-1997; however, geese also could be taken by youth hunters beginning in 1998-2000; the same holds true for 2004.

Information for Waterfowl Management:

Waterfowl hunters are a critical component in annual efforts to manage migratory birds. Bands reported by hunters and responses to surveys represent the primary sources of information about harvest and hunter attitudes that are used each year to manage these resources and to recommend hunting seasons that accommodate hunting preferences.

Accurate and precise harvest and hunter estimates require that a complete and representative

sampling frame is available. Hunters can help by prompting license vendors to ask and record information about the previous year's hunting activity. The questions asked by vendors are not designed to estimate harvest; they are too general to be used for specific harvest data. Instead, the questions asked of hunters are used only to develop the harvest survey that is conducted after the season.

Bands that are recovered and reported by hunters are the source of information about survival and harvest rates, migration, and harvest derivation and distribution. A toll-free telephone number (1-800-327-2263) now provides an easy method for hunters to report bands. Following the phone report (hunters do not have to send in the band) hunters will be sent a certificate with specific information about the harvested bird's banding location, date, and age when banded.

Motion-wing Decoys (MWD):

Primary concerns associated with the use of motion-wing decoys (MWD) include potential increases in harvest, infringement on traditional methods, and issues of fair chase. Although several studies have shown MWD use results in higher success rates, it remains uncertain how MWD use affects overall harvest rates. Even if harvest rates are greater, the impact of hunting mortality must be kept in perspective relative to influences of habitat conditions and weather. During periods of high populations and favorable habitat conditions, the impact of harvest in general and hunting methods specifically may be relatively unimportant.

From a technical viewpoint, even if harvest effects are significant and lasting, regulation of hunting methods may not be necessary. As long as overall harvest rates are incorporated into hunting season considerations, the way ducks are taken is not necessarily an issue - from a biological perspective. It would be necessary, however, to determine whether hunters prefer more liberal opportunity (e.g. longer season) versus greater hunting success (e.g. using motion-wing decoys) if harvest impacts are significant and regulation changes are needed.

Some objections are rooted in issues of hunting tradition, learned skills (e.g. calling, blinds, choosing hunting locations, etc.), and public perception of hunters and hunting. These are valid concerns, although difficult to measure and incorporate into decisions. Undoubtedly, many hunting and fishing regulations are based on these types of concerns, which usually also have biological implications. Yet the ethical boundaries are poorly defined. A strong argument could be made in favor of hunting experience, tradition, and learned skills instead of another hunting gadget. An equally strong case could be made for enhanced hunting success as an attraction to novice and inexperienced hunters and a way to prompt or maintain interest in hunting and support for conservation.

Efforts to evaluate the use and attitudes regarding MWD were initiated in 2000 and continued in 2001. Field observations, reports from hunters on Department areas, responses to post-season surveys, and a waterfowl hunter attitude survey have provided insights into effectiveness and preferences for future use. Based on our initial work we found:

- 1) The use of MWDs affected duck behavior apparently leading to greater hunter opportunity and hunting success. When using a MWD hunters shot and retrieved 1.28 more total ducks per hunting party (2-3 hunters) and 0.82 more male mallards than when not using a MWD.